

The *Polis* and the *Res Publica*: Two Arendtian Models of Violence¹

ABSTRACT: The influence of the ancient Greek world on Hannah Arendt's thought is well-documented, yet her interest in the politics of the Roman Republic is often considered less central to her work. This paper explores Arendt's analysis of both these political worlds, with a particular emphasis on what this comparison can tell us about her understanding of the role of violence in politics. Arendt has generally been understood to structurally exclude violence from the political, in part due to the claims she makes in her later essay 'On Violence.' Yet in her portrayal of Roman politics, and her preference for this political system above the Greeks' (in certain respects), a genuinely political engagement with violence can be discerned. The paper claims that this particular case study indicates the framework of the *vita activa*, set out by Arendt in *The Human Condition*, should be reinterpreted, particularly insofar as 'fabrication' or 'work' here appears as something that is legitimately part of the political, and incorporates within it some forms of violence. The claims that violence is structurally anti-political, this paper concludes, are temporally specific to a twentieth century context, rather than constituting a foundational 'rule' of political practice for Arendt.

1

The influence of the Greek world on Hannah Arendt's thought is evident in her characterisation of 'action,' an agonal practice at the very core of her notion of the political. Her extensive use of Greek political terms and references to Greek politics in *The Human Condition* in particular, and in her work more broadly, has resulted in a broad consensus within the literature that Arendt's developed political thought uses Greece as a political

¹ Many thanks to those who have offered valuable feedback or suggestions on this paper, including Duncan Kelly, Guy Paltieli, Chris Brooke, Paul Cartledge, Christopher Meckstroth, and the attendees of the Cambridge History of Political Thought seminar where this paper was first presented.

exemplar.² It has also been the focus of many critics of Arendt's work. Yet this assumption is problematic because it reduces 'the political' to the single dimension of agonistic action, whereas, I will argue, Arendt's criticisms of Greek politics, alongside her use of other, radically contrasting, political examples, offer an alternative image of the political sphere.

In particular, this paper will claim that Arendt's understanding of the Roman Republic is an equally important narrative in her work and that our understanding of politics in Arendt's work should be revised accordingly. This paper will focus on the contrast between the political use of violence in these two worlds, as portrayed, (with, at times, doubtful historical accuracy) by Arendt. She is often believed to have wholly excluded violence from politics, in its proper form. Her 1969 essay 'On Violence' is the most categorical formulation of her stance on political violence, where she explicitly opposes the 'consensus from right to left to the effect that violence is nothing more than the most flagrant manifestation of power.'³ Whilst violence is merely strength, multiplied by tools, and thereby accumulated in the hands of the few, power is the ability of the many to act in concert, and it is this participatory power that fundamentally drives politics, Arendt believes. 'All political institutions are manifestations of power,' she writes, 'they petrify and decay as soon as the living power of the people ceases to uphold them.'⁴ The 'muteness' of violence is contrasted with the discourse of power, and the instrumentality of violence opposed to the intrinsic value that only free, public action can bear.⁵ Thus, 'in so far as violence plays a predominant role in wars and revolutions,' Arendt states, 'both occur outside the political realm, strictly speaking, in spite of their enormous role in recorded history.'⁶

² This consensus covers a broad range of interpretations however, as will be explored in this article.

³ Hannah Arendt, 'On Violence,' in *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1969), 134.

⁴ Ibid, 140.

⁵ Ibid, 145.

⁶ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (London: Penguin Books, 1965), 19.

Arendt's portrayal of the Greek *polis* as a space which categorically excluded violence from the political sphere can be seen as either the root of these claims, or a key exemplar of the political, as it exists in its fullest form.⁷ However, in her outline of the Roman understanding of the relationship between violence and politics, which is in certain respects diametrically opposed to the Greek conceptualisation, she is no less admiring, considering it, in fact, to be an important feature of the Romans' more pragmatic and sustainable politics. Thus, as this paper will seek to show, Arendt's work on Rome offers another way into understanding the relationship between violence and politics which enables an engagement between violence and the political. It focuses on the comparison between Greek and Roman politics as an example of how, in her depiction of political practice, a different realisation of the relationship between politics and violence emerges to the highly abstract conceptualisation offered in 'On Violence.'⁸ But although this is just one example from Arendt's vast oeuvre, it is particularly illuminating on the question of how *in reality* violence and politics meet, and an example which forces us to reconsider Arendt's idea of violence in the political sphere in a broader sense.

⁷ The term 'Greece' in this paper follows Arendt's rather vague usage, referring to the Greek city-states of the ancient world broadly, but evidently predominantly drawing from the history of Athens, which she occasionally uses interchangeably with 'Greece.' This not only masks the wide variation between the over 100 city-states of ancient Greece, but tends to glaze over the development of democratic political culture within Athens itself, which changes radically over this period (a development she discusses at times, but which does not prevent her from identifying 'Greece' in the main as a unitary political culture.)

⁸ Although 'On Violence' was written in the context of a very clear and particular set of violent threats to politics, not least the possibility of nuclear war, the actual description of violence she offers in this essay is quite divorced from the particular threats with which she was concerned.

This approach builds on the work of Patricia Owens, who has also convincingly written on the political relevance of war in Arendt's work on Rome.⁹ She argues, in her 2009 work *Between War and Politics*, that whilst violence (here, warfare) is outside the realm of politics, it is constitutively exterior, that is, violent engagements may positively influence the political space of action. This study develops this line of argument further, drawing on Arendt's portrayal of the Roman Republic, but also offering a method by which to integrate Arendt's writings on warfare with her writings on violence more broadly. I suggest that the existence of a legitimate engagement between political action and certain violent acts may be incorporated into the action/work/labour framework set out by Arendt in *The Human Condition*. Rather than segregating 'action,' and defining it as equivalent to politics – as the Greek model suggests – the Roman model Arendt outlines instead frames politics in broader terms. Specifically, the Roman model of politics based upon 'tradition' (in Arendt's particular interpretation of that term) leads to a reframing of politics as an activity not simply of action, but also of 'work.' Conceptually, this enables instrumental and 'speechless' violence to enter into political relationships, otherwise excluded by a pure action-oriented interpretation of Arendt's work. Whilst 'On Violence' positions violence outside the proper sphere of politics, strictly understood, it does not necessarily position violence *against* the political. This distinction belies a certain flexibility in the theoretical definition of violence that Arendt makes; creating a space in which a more politically oriented form of violence might be found.

⁹ Patricia Owens, *Between War and Politics: International Relations and the Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); 'Hannah Arendt: Violence and the Inescapable Fact of Humanity,' in *Hannah Arendt and International Relations*, ed. Anthony F. Lang and John Williams (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 41-65.

Yet, as David Bates's 2010 article on Arendt's work on war in the classical era amply illustrates, these readings of power must also be read as a response to the contemporary political context in which Arendt wrote, namely the post-war breakdown in political tradition, the changing nature of warfare itself in an atomic era, and the growing global influence and quasi-imperial tendencies of the United States. However, against Bates, I claim that the substantive differences in context do not necessarily undermine the relevance of the Roman approach to contemporary politics. Rather, it provides part of an alternative thread in Arendt's work, one which is more open to certain possibilities for violence in, or at least for, politics, and thereby offers a more pragmatic and plausible political model.

2

Noel O'Sullivan, in his 1975 article on Arendt's 'Hellenic nostalgia,' writes that the life of the Greek *polis* 'constitutes the focal point of all her thought. Hellenism determines even her definition of politics.'¹⁰ Dana Villa agrees that 'the politics of democratic Athens [was] transformed into something of an "ideal type" by Arendt.'¹¹ Because of this, he writes, '*The Human Condition* mines ancient Greek poetry, drama, and philosophy in order to show how, in its original understanding, political action was viewed as the very opposite of violence, coercion or rule.'¹² While Villa appeals to this 'rescue of the intersubjective essence of political action' as 'Arendt's primary contribution to political theory,' others are more critical.¹³ The Athenian 'idealisation' of Athens serves as the basis for criticism of Arendt's

¹⁰ Noel O'Sullivan, 'Hannah Arendt: Hellenic Nostalgia and Industrial Society, in *Contemporary Political Philosophers*, ed. A. de Crespigny and K. Minogue (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1975), 229.

¹¹ Dana Villa, 'Introduction,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. Dana Villa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 9.

¹² *Ibid.*, 12.

¹³ Dana Villa, 'Beyond Good and Evil: Arendt, Nietzsche, and the Aestheticization of Political Action,' *Political Theory* 20, no. 2 (1992): 274.

politics by O'Sullivan as well as Bhikhu Parekh, who claims that her Greek depiction of agonic action is problematically elitist, because only 'the acts in which men begin something new are unusual enough to attract attention and deserve remembrance.' And he further criticises Arendt for not paying attention to the 'inescapable instrumental dimension' of politics, 'turning politics into a theatrical and somewhat pointless activity.'¹⁴

Benhabib, meanwhile, identifies an irreconcilable tension between Arendt's modernism and anti-modernism. 'The unresolved contradictions in some of her formulations can be traced back to this twofold spiritual-intellectual legacy' she argues, contrasting the 'persecuted Jew...the philosophical and political modernist,' with the Heideggerian influenced 'antimodernist Grecophile theorist of the polis.'¹⁵ Habermas, likewise, claims that many problems derive from Arendt's commitment to 'the historical and conceptual constellation of classical Greek philosophy.'¹⁶ Not least among these, he argues, is the instability of praxis, due to the 'unimpaired subjectivity' Arendt demands of political action; her exclusion of social issues; and a failure to engage with the relationship between state and economy.¹⁷

As these examples show, what sets Greek politics apart for Arendt is a particular concept of 'action' emphasising the heroic and the agonal. This, Arendt believes, was the Greek solution to the unpredictability of human action and destiny.¹⁸ The Greek answer to the

¹⁴ Bhikhu Parekh, *Hannah Arendt and the Search for a New Political Philosophy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1984), 118-9, 51.

¹⁵ Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 1996), 118.

¹⁶ Jürgen Habermas, 'Hannah Arendt's Communications Concept of Power,' *Social Research* 44, no. 1 (1977): 7.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 11, 15.

¹⁸ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 192.

vagaries of fortune, Arendt writes, was that, ‘whoever consciously aims at being “essential,” at leaving behind a story and an identity which will win “immortal fame,” must not only risk his life but expressly choose, as Achilles did, a short life and premature death.’¹⁹ This is because, only one ‘who does not survive his one supreme act remains the indisputable master of his identity and possible greatness, because he withdraws into death from the possible consequences.’²⁰ Politics was the space in which this form of action might be realised, and thus the possibility of greatness. This attitude predates Greek democracy, Arendt believed, but it is this spirit that shaped Greek politics through to its decline in the 5th and 4th centuries BC. ‘This concept of action is highly individualistic,’ she writes, becoming ‘the prototype of action for Greek antiquity and influenced, in the form of the so-called agonal spirit, the passionate drive to show one’s self in measuring up against others that underlies the concept of politics prevalent in the city-states.’²¹

Alongside the intensely individualistic ‘action’ of the hero, however, is a notion of power: the coming together of citizens in equal discussion in the public spaces of the *polis*. *Isonomia*, the Greek term for a free constitution, does not mean equality before the law, Arendt claims, ‘but merely that all have the same claim to political activity, and in the *polis*, this activity primarily took the form of speaking with one another. *Isonomia* is therefore essentially the equal right to speak, and as such is the same thing as *isegoria*.’²² Action as speech produces the shared perspective that enables power, and thus, politics. The two

¹⁹ Ibid., 193.

²⁰ Ibid., 193-4.

²¹ Ibid., 194.

²² The claim to equivalency between *isonomia* and *isegoria* is generally not accepted by historians, for whom *isonomia*, with its specific relation to equality under the law, is a more politically charged term, open to contestation through the question of whom, exactly, may be deemed ‘equal’ within the legal framework. Hannah Arendt, ‘Introduction into Politics,’ in *The Promise of Politics*, ed. Jerome Kohn, (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), 118.

connect in their shared reliance on discourse: to produce power, and to make action immortal through narrative.

The prioritisation of ‘action’ understood in terms of an agonal process of discourse between equal citizens, whether understood as the ‘drive to show one’s self’ or the power that emerged through these exchanges of speech, marked out action as *the* distinctively political activity. In this agonal discourse, Arendt claims, the value of politics was to be found: the creating of intersubjective meaning between citizens. Political action was therefore not end-oriented or consequentialist, but rather, the activity held intrinsic value. Yet this excludes two elements generally considered essential to politics: legislation, and violence. Both were understood as acts of ‘making,’ of exerting dominance over some subject to produce particular outcomes. Thus both were considered incompatible with the essential equality of the political sphere and the intrinsic value of its own practices. War, Arendt writes, is something that happened outside the *polis*. Legislation, meanwhile, is seen as pre-political, creating the space in which men might then act politically. ‘Before men began to act,’ she writes, ‘a definite space had to be secured and a structure built where all subsequent actions could take place, the space being the public realm of the *polis* and its structure the law.’²³ Yet, she continues, ‘the laws, like the walls around the city, were not results of action, but products of making.’²⁴

Arendt’s claim that Athens stands at the beginning of Western politics, and her use of Athens to illustrate fundamental political elements, including action, has led many to equate Arendt’s ideal politics with her depiction of the *polis*. But the ‘highly theatrical

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 194-5.

individualism’ of the Greek *polis* does not define politics for Arendt.²⁵ There is, alongside Arendt’s admiration for Greece, a critique of Greek politics, equally important in positioning ‘action’ in Arendtian politics. As Margaret Canovan writes, ‘for all Arendt’s undoubted admiration for the Greeks, she did not regard Athens as a political model in any exclusive sense.’²⁶ This critique clearly emerges in Arendt’s contrasting depiction of the politics of the Roman Republic. A comparison of Arendt’s work on Greece and Rome enables a more nuanced understanding of both, and indeed, her idea of politics itself. Greece, it will be argued, is ‘ideal’ only in certain highly abstracted senses, while Arendt’s praise of Roman political practice as that opposes key elements of Greek politics reveals her depiction of political practice to be much more complex.

3

Although the Greeks succeeded in positioning action at the centre of political life (where Arendt believes it should be), their politics was still flawed, in Arendt’s view.²⁷ This is often missed by readers of her work, as Roy Tsao points out. ‘Throughout *The Human Condition*,’ Tsao writes, ‘Arendt deliberately – and systematically – attributes to the ancient Greeks a set of beliefs about the nature of politics that are at odds with her own theoretical claims in this same book.’²⁸ Specifically, it is clear that Roman law (*lex*) is, for Arendt, superior to Greek law (*nomos*). Even Plato and Aristotle’s elevation of lawmaking in politics did not truly

²⁵ Dana Villa, ‘Hannah Arendt: Modernity, Alienation, and Critique,’ in *Hannah Arendt and the Meaning of Politics*, ed. C. Calhoun and J. McGowan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 193.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 115.

²⁷ Arendt’s criticism of the Greek *polis*, is independent of Arendt’s much more severe (and well-understood) criticism of Greek philosophy, it should be stressed.

²⁸ Roy T. Tsao, ‘Arendt Against Athens: Rereading the Human Condition,’ *Political Theory* 30, no. 1 (2002): 98.

comprehend the ‘political genius of Rome,’ writes Arendt, that is, the Romans’ *particular* idea of legislation and foundation.²⁹ Rather, the philosophers suggested that men should renounce their capacity for action in favour of greater stability for the political body through fixed, unchanging legislation – a cure worse than the problem, Arendt believed.³⁰

Tsao claims that Roman *lex* was preferred by Arendt because the Greeks *conflated* action and ‘making’ – a non-political activity – in their understanding of legislation as the firmly defined boundary of the political. However, the proper relationship between action and making in politics is far more complex, and I suggest rather that the problem may be summarised in the idea that the Greeks failed to adequately embody the realities of political action within the law.

There are a number of inter-related elements to this claim. First, it is problematic, for Arendt, that *nomos* is characterised in terms of boundaries, rather than relationships, as *lex* was. The *polis* was pre-defined: before ‘action’ could be enacted, a supreme legislator was required to define the political space: territorially, legally, and demographically. Within a space thus cleared for politics, citizens could then talk and act in a political manner – politics therefore rested upon the distinctly prepolitical productive activity of the legislator. ‘The law is, so to speak, something by which the polis enters its political life, something it cannot abolish.’³¹ Greek law therefore ruled *over* men, rather than being a product of political action, and thus, the ‘extraordinary political fruitfulness of the Roman concept of law,’ is opposed to Greek *nomos*, ‘both father and despot in one.’³² The *polis* citizen was a ‘son and slave’ his

²⁹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 195.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Arendt, ‘Introduction into Politics,’ 182.

³² Arendt, ‘Introduction into Politics,’ 180, 182.

entire life, Arendt writes, ‘all feared the law of their polis every bit as much as the Persians feared their king.’³³ Dean Hammer notes that for Arendt ‘the Roman conception of founding...points to a significant departure from a Greek conception precisely because founding is not seen as a “once-for-all” affair [but] as an incremental process.’³⁴ In Rome, *lex* was an ongoing process, based upon traditional foundations reimagined for the present. Law appears as a form of rule in Greece, rather than an embodiment of action and an integrated aspect of the political as it did in Rome.

Conceptually the Greek idea of ‘despotic’ law therefore stands in opposition to Arendt’s ideal of free action. But that the Greeks conceptualised politics in this manner had practical consequences and the second aspect of Arendt’s critique of *nomos* relates to this. *Nomos*, or law perceived as boundaries, was detrimental to the success of the *polis* because it prevented the Greeks from adapting as internal and external conditions changed. Hence the Athenians’ relationship with their colonies could never develop into a political relationship, but only ever be one of dominance – politics itself could not expand beyond its defined boundaries. So while Arendt praises the Greeks’ understanding of the priority of action *within* the political space, she notes that its excess of action was repressed by legal limitations. A chief reason, she writes, ‘for the incredible development of gift and genius in Athens...was precisely that from beginning to end its foremost aim was to make the extraordinary an ordinary occurrence of everyday life.’³⁵ Yet this was just as responsible for ‘the hardly less surprising decline in the city-state.’³⁶ While the *polis* was fixed by legislation, within these immovable boundaries, action itself – and specifically, the deeply heroic and individual form

³³ Ibid., 182.

³⁴ Dean Hammer, ‘Hannah Arendt and Roman Political Thought: The Practice of Theory,’ *Political Theory* 30, no. 1 (2002): 130.

³⁵ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 197.

³⁶ Ibid.

of action that was lauded in the Greek world – was irrepressible, and this conflict is identified by Arendt as a major factor in the decline of the *polis*.

The third and final point I wish to highlight here, is that whilst this conflict posed problems, the Greek ideal of ‘heroic’ action was itself problematic for political stability. In her essay ‘Introduction into Politics,’ written around the same time as *The Human Condition*, Arendt explains why. Action, she writes, ‘can never occur in isolation, insofar as the person who begins something can embark upon it only after he has won over others to help him.’ In this sense, she continues, ‘all action is action “in concert”...that is, in the sense of the Greek verb *prattein*, to carry out and complete.’ This is the stage of action which ‘ultimately determines how human affairs turn out and how they appear, it is the most politically important stage.’ Action in concert is preceded by ‘the beginning, the *archein* [which] depends on an individual and his courage to embark upon an enterprise.’ Thus, Arendt concludes, ‘although all freedom would forfeit its best and deepest meaning without this freedom of spontaneity, the latter is itself prepolitical...spontaneity depends on organizational forms of life only to the extent that it is ultimately the world that can organize it.’³⁷ So, the form of action so highly prized in Greek politics was, although necessary for politics, in reality *prepolitical*. Yet the founding aim of Greek politics was to raise up this aspect of action, to ‘make the extraordinary an everyday occurrence.’³⁸

What resulted from this conjunction was both the genius and downfall of Athens. The utter boundlessness of the action which drove Athens forward, ultimately pulled it apart from the inside. On one side is the *polis* as a defined creation of the legislator, on the other, the

³⁷ Arendt, ‘Introduction into Politics,’ 127-8.

³⁸ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 197.

heroic individual continuously attempting to reshape the *polis* in their own mould – but without a means by which to constitutionally enact the (often much-needed) change. Constant attempts to introduce the new are enacted in opposition to the stability of the state, structured as it is. The missing link is power, that is, action as *prattein* or carrying through, as opposed to action as *archein*, or pure initiation, the necessary juncture between (individual) action and legislation. *Prattein* embodies the action of the group, rather than the prepolitical initiatory action of the individual into the group, and is thus, Arendt remarks, the most politically important form of action.³⁹ But power is diminished both by Greek heroic action which disempowers the broader mass of the people, and by the constitutional limits of the state conceived as a pre-formed set of boundaries. Pursuing the extraordinary resulted in the remarkable achievements of Greek culture and politics, and their immortality over the millennia. But in political fact it also resulted in the collapse of the *polis*. The legislatively ‘fixed’ state was unable to manage the action, conflict, and, ultimately, violence that increasingly infiltrated the political sphere itself as power was eroded.

In making the claim that Arendt understood the *polis* as a great, but essentially flawed, political entity, I do not suggest that Athens was without importance in her work. Her criticism does not detract from her depiction of the Greek political system as a shining example of pure heroic action in the political sphere, but it does mean such a system is unstable, and unlikely to endure, particularly when conjoined with a rigid legislative framework. Not only did this system fail, moreover, Arendt believed it produced its own antithesis in the work of Plato and his successors, fostering the emergence of an anti-political prioritisation of contemplation. It is worth noting that Arendt herself recognises many of the problems with Athenian politics that her critics have identified with *her* notion of ‘politics.’

³⁹ Arendt, ‘Introduction into Politics,’ 127-8.

That she recognised and accepted the difficulties that inhere in the Greek idea of politics undermines the claim that Arendt's politics is an idealisation of Greek politics. She did not, as Parekh suggests, adopt an individualistic, and elitist notion of politics from Athens, but rather identified this kind of action as not wholly political, strictly speaking, and as such, the root of fundamental problems in the *polis*.⁴⁰ And the accusation which is often levelled at Arendt, of the 'pointlessness' or anti-instrumentality of the politics she depicts, is undermined by her portrayal of power: first as the truly political form of action, and secondly as the form of action which carries through, or which achieves a purpose.⁴¹ It points to power as an action that is not, as heroic action is, wholly untouched by consequence, but equally, which cannot be understood in the same way as the utilitarian logic of work, still less labour.

Relationships of power (the *praxein* of action) have a binding force, and contingently sustain the living space of politics, but that space, as Athens shows, can deteriorate rapidly through the influence of internal or external change. Yet while power stabilises politics, a pure conception of politics as power and action remains to some degree unstable, because below power there is always the innately unpredictable existence of human freedom as action. 'Unlike the spaces that are the works of our hands,' she writes, the political space of appearance 'does not survive the actuality of the movement which brought it into being, but disappears not only with the dispersal of men...but with the disappearance or arrest of the activities themselves.'⁴²

⁴⁰ This is not to suggest that Arendt's politics does not show itself, in some respects, as elitist, but simply that Greek individualism is not the exclusive inspiration or model for this elitism.

⁴¹ E.g. Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, 'Justice: On Relating Private and Public,' *Political Theory* 9, no. 3 (1981): 270.

⁴² Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 199.

Yet, as Arendt makes clear, there is nothing natural or necessary about the existence of any particular polity; politics neither emerges, nor exists, ‘naturally,’ but must be created by men anew, or transmitted by the actions of men over time. Yet if ‘making,’ or any non-speech action, is excluded from politics, as Arendt claims it is, how can power be maintained? A politics based exclusively on power relies to an unreasonable extent on cooperation, within a system that operates *through* difference and disagreement, rooted in individual action. It is to Arendt’s work on Rome that we must look for an alternative to a pure action-based politics, and one that incorporates a notion of ‘making’ that is far more political than is often believed to be the case.

4

It was the Romans, not the Greeks, to whom Arendt refers as ‘perhaps the most political people we have known.’⁴³ Rome appears as a better exemplar of politics *as a whole*, than Greece does. Yet this has rarely been recognised. As Hammer explains, even those who have noticed Arendt’s treatment of Rome, ‘have been reluctant to assign conceptual form to Roman thinking.’⁴⁴ But the conceptual form of Arendt’s thought on Rome offers a new perspective on her political thought, answering the question of how a political system can both embody action, whilst also enforcing the structural conditions for action.

‘The *polis* was for the Greeks,’ she writes, ‘as the *res publica* was for the Romans, first of all their guarantee against the futility of individual life.’⁴⁵ But the success of this guarantee differed drastically, as evidenced by Rome’s longevity. For Arendt, this durability

⁴³ Ibid., 7.

⁴⁴ Hammer, ‘Hannah Arendt and Roman Political Thought,’ 125.

⁴⁵ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 56.

was a result of the Romans' superior political understanding and implementation of politics. She speaks, often, of the Romans' 'extraordinary political sense,' their 'political genius,' and their deep understanding of political relationships, over and above, and in contrast to, the Greeks.⁴⁶

The Romans succeeded, to a greater extent, and for a longer period of time, to maintain the political space of action. This success was due, Arendt believes, to their understanding and positioning of legislation and foundation in politics, namely how these activities became distinctly *political* in nature rather than prepolitical or extra-political. It is this that Arendt speaks of as the political genius of Rome.⁴⁷ While Arendt praises the Romans for developing 'common sense' into 'the highest criterion in the management of public-political affairs,' in the same breath she praises foundation, or tradition, for its stabilising quality.⁴⁸ Indeed, she writes, 'the genius of Roman politics – not only according to Virgil but, generally, according to Roman self-interpretation – lay in the very principles which attend the legendary foundation of the city.'⁴⁹ And this authority, she argues, 'resting on a foundation in the past as its unshaken cornerstone, gave the world the permanence and durability which humans need because they are mortals.'⁵⁰ She thus positions Rome as a polity based upon the power of the people, whilst at the same time, one whose legislation is in some sense fixed but *also* part of the political process itself. This not only differs sharply from her portrait of the *polis* but from her understanding of politics more generally, as it has been understood. The *res publica* managed to unite permanence with action and power, strengthening the political

⁴⁶ Ibid., 59, 195; Arendt, 'Introduction into Politics,' 178-181.

⁴⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 195.

⁴⁸ Hannah Arendt, 'The Tradition of Political Thought,' in *The Promise of Politics*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), 42.

⁴⁹ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 210.

⁵⁰ Hannah Arendt, 'What is Authority?' in *Between Past and Future*, ed. J. Kohn (London: Penguin, 2006), 94-5.

space without constricting it. And the key to understanding this lies in Arendt's conceptualisation of tradition and the way in which tradition, as an interpretation of foundation, came together with power and action to underpin the political authority of Roman legislation.

The Romans, Arendt writes, 'invented' tradition, in the sense that they were the first to incorporate the principle of the sacredness of their city's foundation, and the necessity of its continued integrity in the *res publica*, into their political self-understanding. The centrality of the Roman foundation resulted in an understanding of political action as the preservation of that foundation. But Roman tradition is not merely a static preservation of the past, but enacted through 'augmentation.' Tradition kept the foundations alive in the continual *re-creation* of the past in the present through, for example, the retelling of histories. Hammer writes that for Arendt, 'this notion of a coincidence of foundation and preservation by virtue of augmentation...was deeply rooted in the Roman spirit and could be read from almost every page of Roman history.'⁵¹

The 'making' of the world in this sense occurs primarily through the preservation of past action through the written word, rather than the construction by a law-giver of a future political world. Instead of the creation of the political space being understood as the activity of a legislator projecting forward, fixing legislation and the borders of the political space into the future, the Romans understood the creation of the political space to be an *active* process of augmenting a sacred foundation. It was political, because it rested on action and power, and durable because it was linked to a particular understanding of the past, and the role of the past in the present. In this way, the continual re-creation and stabilisation of the political

⁵¹ Hammer, 'Hannah Arendt and Roman Political Thought,' 138.

sphere could be enacted. The foundation acted as a limiting institution to counter the agonal, destabilising nature of action, whilst still permitting change and thus a connection to power, the driving force of politics.

For Arendt, the example of Rome shows that politics should be considered as a relationship between structure and action, constructed in such a way that the actions of the political space ought to enable the continual evolution of that space, without destroying it altogether. Without such an understanding of politics, Athens was unable to incorporate political change into the political space itself. In Rome, even the foundation of the city was seen as a continuation of the true beginning, Arendt observes. In the Roman historical narrative, Rome ‘was the resurgence of Troy and the reestablishment of some city-state that had existed before and of which the thread of continuity and tradition never had broken.’⁵² This gave an aspect of stability and continuity to Roman politics which was lacking in the *polis*, where the stabilising factors of legislation were outside politics, and politics itself was dominated to a greater, and ultimately unsustainable extent, by individualistic action. The past became a part of the living tradition of Roman politics: the ‘common sense’ of the Republican political sphere nurtured tradition, while tradition bounded the instability of action behind the political shared world. There is something unique about tradition which, unlike institutions of rule, does not deny action, but mitigates its more dangerous aspects, because it contains or limits action, but without enforcing absolute rules.

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⁵² Arendt, *On Revolution*, 210.

Whereas the key distinction in Arendt's analysis of the politics of the *polis* and the *res publica* – and particularly her more positive appraisal of the *res publica* – was between their respective systems of legislation, this has important implications for her portrayal of violence in the two polities. It is well-known that Arendt, writing through the Cold War, the Vietnam War and in the shadow of the threat of nuclear war, sought to distinguish violence from politics, and extensively and thoroughly criticised the supposed interchangeability of violence and politics. However, in these ancient examples, the relationship between violence and politics – the potential for a legitimately 'political' violence – appears in quite a different light. (The important question of context will be returned to at the end of this paper with respect to the claims I make here.)

The difference between Greek law or *nomos*, and Roman law or *lex*, illustrates the way in which violence plays a very different role in the understanding, and practice, of the political in Greece and Rome. Legislation understood to be outside politics or prepolitical, where it forms the 'wall-like law,' is the specifically Greek notion.⁵³ Legislative change is not within the remit of the citizens, or indeed any institution of the *polis*. The Roman understanding of legislation, by contrast, is that it neither forms the whole of politics, nor is strictly prepolitical. The Roman sense of *lex* corresponds to Montesquieu's 'rapports,' Arendt argues, 'the "rules" or règles which determine the government of a world and without which a world would not exist at all...the relations which exist and preserve different realms of being.'⁵⁴ As part of tradition, legislation helps to create the 'world' or political space that enables and stabilises action. Legislation connects with tradition through 'augmentation,' and thus is an act of 'making' in a limited sense. But importantly, this idea of legislation is not

⁵³ Ibid., 64.

⁵⁴ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 188.

conceptualised as a boundary around the political space, but is understood in terms of a structure of relationships between people in a political community and so is positioned *within* politics. In fact, Arendt argues, ‘the Roman politicization of the space between peoples marks the beginning of the Western world – indeed, it first created the Western world as *world*.’⁵⁵ Unlike *nomos*, which bound politics to a small, intense field of action, Roman *lex* opened up the political space to change.

The political benefit of understanding law as a set of malleable relationships, rather than a fixed boundary structure, is most apparent in the Roman ability to expand their political territory through war and treaty making. Roman political expansionism – incorporating within it, invariably, the aspect of (often extreme) violence – was simply not a possibility open to the Greeks. While the Athenians could aggrandize themselves through war, winning glory and tribute, they could not incorporate their conquests into their polity as the Romans did. The fixed Greek territorial state, the legislature, and the citizen body, could not change as circumstance demanded. To counter political decline, the Greek philosophers looked to a method of stabilising politics that they understood to be *outside* politics – in the realm of abstract thought, and its concept of ‘the good,’ to bring order to chaos – but the Romans reshaped politics itself through their innovative use of legislation as a way of extending politics through post-conflict treaties.

As Patricia Owens writes, Arendt ‘condemned the ancient Greeks for building their *polis* around the ideals of agonistic contest whilst simultaneously excluding all legal and political recognition of the “barbarians” outside...The Romans by contrast, endowed the

⁵⁵ Arendt, ‘Introduction into Politics,’ 189.

“other” with a legally recognized status.’⁵⁶ Roman politics was, in fact, rooted in this notion of alliance between intrinsically different peoples. ‘The Roman Republic, resting itself upon the perpetual alliance between patricians and plebeians,’ writes Arendt, ‘used the instrument of *leges* chiefly for treaties and for ruling the provinces and communities which belonged to the Roman system of alliances, that is, to the ever-extending group of Roman *socii*, who formed the *societas Romana*.’⁵⁷ As Owens explains, the relational concept of *lex* is therefore considered to be superior to Greek *nomos* by Arendt, because it enables the law to flex in order to incorporate new political realities (arrived at through warfare), offering “some stability and form to what would otherwise seem so fleeting and transient, political words and action.”⁵⁸ This is what Owens means when she says that the violence of warfare is ‘constitutively outside’ of politics.⁵⁹

Where the legislator and politics are understood in the Greek mind as two opposing poles, representing the unchanging past and the mortal sphere of agonism and chaos, Roman *lex* and the *res publica* are *both* understood to be public things open to change. Legislation, like politics, is a system of relationships *between* people, and political space emerges as a result of these relationships. The Romans brought legislation together with power, enabling the constant creation and recreation of the *res publica*, thus merging action and durability through tradition: the Roman ‘political genius.’

Yet in her praise for the Roman treaty system, and underlying explanation of how *lex* enables the transformation of violence into politics – and thus creates a legitimate

⁵⁶ Owens, *Between War and Politics*, 10.

⁵⁷ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 188.

⁵⁸ Owens, ‘Violence and the Inescapable Fact of Humanity,’ 45.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

relationship, or route, between one and the other – that is definitively excluded by *nomos*, Arendt illustrates how violence may indeed be incorporated into politics in a positive sense. It is only in Roman antiquity, she writes, not Greece, where we find the first attempts to justify war, since, for the Greeks, war was outside the political it did not require justification.⁶⁰ For most of history since then, she writes, (but not today) ‘war was indeed the continuation of politics by other means.’⁶¹

But the Roman justification of violence in foreign affairs was not simply an instrumental means of legitimising warfare, but inseparable from the Roman understanding of politics. The ‘ambition of Rome was not to subject the whole world to Roman power and *imperium*, but to throw the Roman system of alliances over all countries of the earth,’ Arendt writes – in short, to create a *world* republic, not simply a dominion.⁶² And at the root of this belief that violence actively produces a political world, is the Roman people’s own history. Roman *lex* and its system of international treaties, originated, she suggests in the fact that the *populus Romanus* ‘owed its existence to such a war-born partnership, namely, to the alliance between patricians and plebeians, whose internal civil strife was concluded through the famous laws of the Twelve Tables.’⁶³ The Roman system of internal legislation and foreign treaty-making, and indeed their whole political tradition, is premised upon a belief that violence may be transformed into genuine politics. And this, apparently, not only is of little concern to Arendt, but is in fact praised by her.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 12-3.

⁶¹ Arendt, ‘Introduction into Politics,’ 146.

⁶² Arendt, *On Revolution*, 188.

⁶³ Ibid.

A note of historical scepticism must be sounded here. Arendt's depiction of violence in Rome unquestionably underplays the severity and frequency of mob violence, particularly in the late Republic, and the influence of this extra-legal violence on Roman politics. The treaty between patrician and plebs, on which she bases the principle of *lex*, was only ever tenuous and unsteady, with both sides utilising violence for their own interests. Arendt had, in this respect, as more broadly, a willingness to overlook or accept certain forms of violence in society – as long as it does not interfere with 'politics' – that would be considered extraordinarily violent by any normal standards. And in the Roman case she is, unfortunately, largely silent on what the implications of this are for either the legitimacy or stability of the political sphere. As to whether this is a deliberate omission or mere historical inaccuracy, given the frequency of violence within the later Roman Republic, and that Arendt had, as a younger woman, extensively studied the histories of both Greece and Rome, makes this less likely to be inaccuracy than pointed omission. Certainly, in the context of the 'pact' between plebs and patricians in which she roots the legitimisation of political violence within the Republic, this is problematic, and the failure to deal with this can only be considered a weakness in her argument. Furthermore, the charged, often violent relationship between the rich and poor, does not accord well with the optimistic political image of Rome which she offers: the bastion of political continuity and stability.

Yet Arendt does offer us something which allows us to frame her claims about political violence more clearly: the example of Carthage. The brutal destruction of Carthage by the Romans in the second century BC is distinguished by its extreme and totalising violence, and the absence of any attempt by Rome to 'politicise' Carthage by forming an alliance with it. Indeed, our modern 'total wars,' Arendt writes, are no more than a 'reversion

of warfare to the days when the Romans wiped Carthage off the face of the earth.’⁶⁴ This is – now as then – no less than one of the few ‘mortal sins’ of politics, she writes, because it eradicates both a whole people, and a constitution, ‘both of which harbour the possibility – and in the constitution’s case, the intention – of being immortal.’⁶⁵ Thus Carthage, as a total war, is an example of the ‘overstepping of the limits inherent in violent action.’⁶⁶ It oversteps the limits of politics, because ‘the hostile encounter that is part of conflict can remain an encounter between people only if the battle is broken off before the destruction of the vanquished and a different kind of encounter arises out of battle.’⁶⁷

And yet, while this necessarily falls outside any legitimate form of relationship between violence and politics, Carthage was, Arendt claims, neither a negation of the general Roman principle of treaty, nor was it avoidable. Carthage is portrayed, by Arendt, following the Romans, as a ‘government that never kept its word and never forgave,’ and which thus could not be dealt with through political alliance (even following defeat in war). It ‘embodied an anti-Roman political principle against which Roman statesmanship was powerless and would have destroyed Rome had not Rome destroyed it first.’⁶⁸ Carthage represents not politics, but brutal necessity, for Arendt, highlighting the desperate importance of genuine politics enabling peoples to escape – sometimes – the realm of always-violent necessity. Politics is not a solution for all worldly threats, not is politics present in all state-enacted violence. Yet, for Arendt, the Roman approach to understanding the place of violence in public life was both definitively political and a valuable force for the Republic.

⁶⁴ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 14-5.

⁶⁵ Arendt, ‘Introduction into Politics,’ 161.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 177.

⁶⁸ Arendt, ‘Introduction into Politics,’ 183-4.

I do not want to claim that the description of politics, and its relationship with violence, that is offered in Arendt's portrayal of the ancient world is at odds with the rest of her work. Quite the opposite is true: the highly abstracted concepts laid out within 'On Violence' must be understood together with the more complex analysis of politics, as it is practiced in the far-from-ideal real world, to fully grasp the claims Arendt is making about how politics and violence relate. Of particular importance, in this respect, in Arendt's writings on Rome, and absent if one simply understands her work as an idealisation of Greece, is the insight that politics, although *defined* by action, is not exclusively action, but also relies upon a human artifice created by men through certain kinds of *political* fabrication.

Her analysis of Roman politics emphasises the importance of a counterpart to action in politics, understood as tradition and legislation, enacting a continual making and remaking of the political world, including through acts of violence. Any political world is more than intangible 'common sense,' important though that is. Tradition must be embodied within the common sense if it is to influence the actions of the community, by framing which actions are seen to be legitimate according to the founding principles. But it is also part of an institutional and cultural fabricated world. The sustaining of the past in the present, and for the present, must be in part entrenched in a physical world if it is not to suffer the same problems of discontinuity and spontaneous change inherent in action. Physical things are required to 'give the human artifice the stability without which it could never be a reliable home for men,' Arendt states. 'The man-made world of things, the human artifice erected by *homo faber*, becomes a home for mortal men, whose stability will endure and outlast the ever-changing moment of their lives and actions.' Therefore, she continues,

acting and speaking men need the help of *homo faber* in his highest capacity, that is, the help of the artists, of poets and historiographers, of monument-builders or writers, because without them, the only product of their activity, the story they enact and tell, would not survive at all.⁶⁹

Thus, *homo faber*, ‘in his highest capacity’ – through work that involves telling the stories of action – is *required* for a political entity to transcend any particular time, and sustain itself over longer periods. For Arendt, the writer, poet, historian, monument maker – and, we might add, legislator – are integral to the stabilisation of the human artifice by establishing understanding of the various concepts and categories created through lived experience. This understanding of ‘work,’ then, connects to her conception of tradition, in at least two important respects. First, the examples Arendt offers of the politically relevant productive aspect of the *homo faber* are deeply historical: from monument building, to historiography, to poets in the form of heroic storytellers, all are artists who seek to preserve history for the future, framing events as exemplary experiences. Secondly, the manner in which this comes about closely resembles the dual aspect of tradition for Arendt: being both a ‘fixing’ of action; whilst also relying on its integration with action to maintain its authority.

Within the production of political works, there is a spectrum of types of productive activity, either more or less closely connected to action. Physical art has a relative permanence of character; closer to a utilitarian ‘making’ than some other forms of culture-production.⁷⁰ At the other extreme is poetry, in which ‘remembrance, *Mnēmosynē*, the mother of the muses, is directly transformed into memory.’ However, she continues, ‘of all things of

⁶⁹ Ibid., 173.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 168.

thought, poetry is closest to thought, and a poem is less a thing than any other work of art; yet even a poem...will eventually be “made,” that is, written down and transformed into tangible thing.’⁷¹ But in all forms, it is meaningful language that is made durable, speech action ‘fixed’ in memory, but open to interpretation. These forms of art are the medium through which tradition, an attitude of sanctity towards the past, is entrenched in a society over time, and as such tradition is as much part of the world of *homo faber* – albeit at its most political extreme – as it is of action and politics. Tradition straddles the two worlds of work and action in a way that is absolutely necessary to its existence. The balance, however, is a fine one. When tradition is seen as a dialogue between past and present it brings action and durability together. Too much emphasis on the past, and one risks limiting free action, too much on the present, and politics falls into the problem experienced in the *polis* of the instability of unrestricted natality. Hence tradition is envisaged by Arendt in its Roman guise as a living re-creation of the past: the use of the past and its meanings and exemplars in the context of the present, not just as an authority set in stone, but a pragmatic and valuable political resource.

Thus, while some argue, as Tsao does, argue that Arendt criticises the Greeks because they conflated making and action, in fact, the problem was that they possessed a flawed understanding of the role of ‘making’ in politics. Instead Arendt appeals to an idea of making which took place in Roman politics through tradition and legislation. This differs from the Greeks in terms of the perception of time and the presence of power. Legislation is not seen to ‘make the future,’ but preserve and augment the principles of the past. The original root, Arendt writes, of the term authority, ‘derives from the verb *augere*, “augment,” and what authority or those in authority constantly augment is the foundation.’⁷² In this sense, power is

⁷¹ Ibid., 169-70.

⁷² Arendt, ‘What is Authority?’ 121.

embodied within the legislative activity whilst maintaining a sense of tradition, or the sanctity of the past. It is an active engagement with the past in the present, as opposed to the passive involvement of the Greeks in their political submission to the legislator of the past.

The Roman political world is thus comprised of power, action, and, in a limited sense: ‘work.’ And this latter activity is deeply violent: ‘an element of violence is inevitably inherent in all activities of making, fabricating, and producing.’⁷³ For Arendt, making is a process of construction, but it is also, as a process of change, a kind of destruction. This is where violence is inevitable in the making process. It clears a space for the new by rejecting and destroying the old. Human action, Arendt points out, does not start ‘ab ovo, to create ex nihilo. In order to make room for one’s own action, something that was there before must be removed or destroyed.’⁷⁴ Given that work is, in some sense, a part of the political sphere, a sphere defined by its commitment to action, its relationship to politics requires further clarification. Even if violent work is in aid of the political, or even necessary for the political, it still follows the logic of work. Hence, Arendt states, ‘the law produces the arena within which politics occurs, and contains in itself the violent force inherent in all production.’⁷⁵ However, political violence must be distinguished from the primal violence of nature, against which the political acts as a safeguard. The ‘element of violation and violence is present in all fabrication,’ Arendt writes, ‘and *homo faber*...has always been a destroyer of nature...[Yet] the experience of this violence is the most elemental experience of human strength and, therefore, the very opposite of the painful, exhausting effort experienced in sheer labor.’⁷⁶

⁷³ Ibid., 111.

⁷⁴ Hannah Arendt, ‘Lying in Politics,’ in *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1969), 5.

⁷⁵ Arendt, ‘Introduction into Politics,’ 181.

⁷⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 139-140.

Arendt's discussion of Rome shows – although it is not the primary intention of her work on this topic – that the violence of work is not inherently anti-political. As she writes, 'neither violence nor power is a natural phenomenon, that is, a manifestation of the life process; they belong to the political realm of human affairs whose essentially human quality is guaranteed by man's faculty of action, the ability to begin.'⁷⁷ It is only when violence becomes disengaged from power, from the primacy of action, that it becomes anti-political. Conceptually this is what Arendt describes in 'On Violence,' and in practice, this excess and misunderstanding of violence is what she believes has occurred in most of the modern sovereign political systems she criticises. Yet when conjoined with a system of legislation that enables the violence of 'making' to be transformed, and thus incorporated, into a new political world, violence becomes, while still not an implicitly political action, an act that may be described as a part of a recognisably political space of action. Politics, then, transcends the strict boundaries laid out in *The Human Condition*, moving beyond action alone.

7

David Bates, in his article on Arendt's 'imperial republic' writes: 'Arendt's idiosyncratic and celebrated effort to insulate the space of the "political" in fact emerged out of intense reflections on the nature of warfare in the challenging new context of the nuclear revolution and the Cold War.' As such, he claims, 'Arendt's move toward the abstract existential republicanism developed in her classic works of political theory...can only be properly understood in relation to her initial theorization of "omnicidal" warfare and the consequent

⁷⁷ Arendt, 'On Violence,' 179.

invalidation of all “traditional” political concepts.’⁷⁸ Such a position would appear to render Arendt’s discussion of war and violence in the ancient Greek and Roman worlds irrelevant to modernity.

Certainly, the context in which Arendt understood herself to be writing affects how directly we might apply her work on Rome and Greece to the modern world. For her, the twentieth century differed from the centuries preceding it in two connected ways. First, the emergence of total wars of attrition, with no distinction made between civilians and military targets, marked out the twentieth century as something essentially different, a historical movement entrenched by the emergence of nuclear weapons (the ‘omnicidal warfare’ Bates refers to). Secondly, as Bates also points out, the twentieth century was for Arendt the era in which ‘traditional’ ethical and political values had finally been wholly undermined, not least, amongst those traditions, the limitations on violence formerly imposed by political norms. Arendt’s work on violence was, unquestionably, shaped by these considerations. The increasingly imperial character of the American Republic also pressed heavily on Arendt’s mind. Bates writes that, while in the 1950s, Arendt had been ‘open to thinking about the constitutive relationship between republican law and imperial war,’ by the 1970s, she believed American imperialism merely threatened republican values. ‘She had no time, it seems, for any conceptualization of the modern “imperial republic” that might inspire a new principle of politics that would limit war, establish legal relations, and “protect human dignity.”’⁷⁹

⁷⁸ David Bates ‘Enemies and Friends: Arendt on the Imperial Republic at War,’ *History of European Ideas* 36 (2010): 113.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 123.

However, the apparently clear division between, first, the ancient and modern worlds, and secondly, Arendt's early and later work, are not as conclusive as this analysis suggests. In her 1951 work, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, she describes imperialism as one of the great threats to human civilisation and indeed a fundamental means by which political values had been undermined, by the brutal imperialist use and acceptance of violence in their activities. America's hegemonic ambitions and heavy-handed actions across the globe over the 1960s and 1970s were a source of deep concern to Arendt. But it is not the case that her attitude to warfare changed as a result of American activities. In the 1950s, she considered the contemporary use of imperial warfare to be unjustifiable, *despite* her support of imperial elements in Roman warfare in the same period of her work. The differences that appear in her work are, instead, due to the shape of the modern polity and its ideology, *not* a change in Arendt's opinions on this, as will be set out over the following paragraphs.

For Arendt, total war is not, as already noted, a novel phenomenon in history, although it is new to recent, Western history. She directly relates the total wars of the twentieth century to Rome's destruction of Carthage, describing total war not as a historically original phenomenon, but a 'reversion' to the days when Rome 'wiped Carthage off the face of the earth.'⁸⁰ That is, whilst modern warfare is an essentially non-political activity, such activities are not inherently at odds with other forms of violence – that are more positively political, and thereby justifiable – existing at the same time, even enacted by the same people, as in the case of the Romans. The destruction of Carthage did not undermine the more general principle of alliance. The invention of modern techniques of destruction has made total war more rapid, particularly in the case of nuclear war, and this is a far from unsubstantial development in Arendt's view. But her explicit correspondence between

⁸⁰ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 14-5.

Carthage and the wars of the twentieth century reveal that this does not mark a qualitative shift in the nature of ‘total war’ which is in either case the destruction of ‘worlds’ and whole peoples.

What is far more concerning, and what does mark out a qualitative difference between Roman politics and modern politics is the loss of political values and the ensuing chaos of the modern post-traditional situation. In particular, it is the conflation of violence *with* politics that constitutes a more significant and disturbing difference for Arendt. Unlike for the Romans, who understood that the nature of the political was fundamentally action and power, contemporary political actors believe themselves to be undertaking politics when they carry out violent acts without any basis of acting for or within a genuinely political world. It is this loss of action, or rather, an understanding of the role action plays in politics, that is problematic. ‘Only the modern age’s conviction that man...is primarily *homo faber* and not an *animal rationale*, brought forth the much older implications of violence inherent in all interpretations of the realm of human affairs as a sphere of making,’ Arendt writes. ‘Marx’s dictum that “violence is the midwife of every old society pregnant with a new one,” that is, of all change in history and politics, only sums up the conviction of the whole modern age and draws the consequences of its innermost belief that history is “made” by men as nature is “made” by God.’⁸¹

By contrast, in the Roman system of politics, where ‘making’ was combined with an understanding of politics as action, and limited to ‘augmentation’ of the past, as opposed to a wholly revolutionary remaking of the future, a certain degree of violence was perfectly permissible in political terms, and even necessary. When ‘making’ *supersedes* action, politics

⁸¹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 228.

is lost, and the violence that emerges is without political justification. It is, of course, against this background that Arendt writes so vehemently against violence, in the sense in which it is associated with politics in a post-Marx era, where history and politics is believed to be ‘made’ by men, that is, when the future is determined in advance, through whatever invariably violent means are necessary. For Arendt, the recovery of action in politics is paramount if we are to reverse this tendency in our politics. Yet, it should not be forgotten that action, as Rome shows, is not the only important aspect of politics, and Arendt’s rejection of violence in the modern world, does not equate to the necessary rejection of violence in all political situations, including, potentially, in our political future. Indeed, in order to protect a new political tradition, the Roman example shows that a degree of violence may be considered justifiable and required for political stability. Of course, none of this is possible unless genuine politics is recovered. But violence – some forms of violence – may be a part of that genuinely political framework.

Arendt is not seeking to justify violence in political terms in her analysis of Greece and Rome, but it is implicit in her claims about the politics of these two worlds. The comparison offered here suggests that, instead of drawing a sharp line between violence and politics, in truth there is a justified political connection between violent acts and political acts in Arendt’s work. Violence does not explicitly exclude politics but the political sphere must draw on, as its foundation, action and power, if it is to be considered legitimate. Today, it is the case that violence is politically inexcusable for Arendt, but this is not due to technical considerations of the means of violence, but the fact that for Arendt, true politics – the only justifying factor for violence – is absent in the world, and has been replaced by a misconception of violence as politics itself.